

Lessons Learned From A Light Infantry Company During Operation *Anaconda*

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On 26 February 2002, I received an operations order from the Task Force 1-87 (TF Rakkasan) staff to conduct combat operations in the Sahi-Kot Valley of southeastern Afghanistan. This article is written to benefit the company grade commissioned and noncommissioned officers who may be called upon to lead their soldiers in combat in our country's war on terrorism. Although many after-action reports have surfaced since we entered this war, most have focused at echelons well above the company level. Infantry squads and platoons also fight and win battles, and this article is for them.

As the task force main effort, my company was to establish platoon-blocking positions (BPs) Heather and Ginger, south of the village of Marzak, along likely enemy exfiltration routes Chrysler and Jeep.

The big picture of this operation was for the Rakkasans—3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault)—to establish blocking positions along the eastern and southern ridges of the Sahi-Kot Valley to block escaping Al Qaeda and Taliban forces, while Anti-Taliban Forces (ATFs) and Special Operations Forces moved from Gardez and cleared the Sahi-Kot Valley, which contained the villages of Serkhankhel, Babulkhel, and Marzak.

The weather was supposed to be good for the air assault, and the enemy had the advantage of terrain. The enemy situation was described as minimal. As we set up our blocking positions, along with the rest of the task force, it was anticipated that Afghan civilians and mixed Al Qaeda and Taliban forces would try to evacuate the Sahi-Kot Valley through our blocking positions.

The company mission was as follows:

H-Hour, D-Day, C/1-87 IN air assaults into AO Cobra to block Al Qaeda withdrawal along exfiltration routes Chrysler and Jeep in order to enable their destruction of Anti-

Taliban Forces. The key tasks of my intent were to conduct a successful air assault, quickly establish the blocking position, block the enemy exfiltration routes, protect the force, and destroy the enemy.

My desired end state was to block exfiltration routes Chrysler and Jeep, Al Qaeda vicinity Objective Remington destroyed and C/1-87 IN positioned for follow-on operations. My decisive point was the destruction of Al Qaeda on route Chrysler. I chose this decisive point because I believed it was the most trafficable route out of the Sahi-Kot Valley.

My plan to mass overwhelming combat power at the decisive point was to place the effects of my most combat-experienced platoon at that location. 1st Platoon had priority of everything and was tasked to destroy Al Qaeda forces on route Chrysler with the purpose of facilitating the Al Qaeda's destruction by Anti-Taliban forces.

2nd Platoon, supporting effort #1, was tasked with blocking Al Qaeda forces on route Jeep to allow their destruction on route Chrysler by the company main effort.



3rd Platoon, supporting effort #2, was tasked to block enemy forces to prevent the envelopment of the company main effort from the south. The purpose of fires was to disrupt enemy movement along route Chrysler.

After numerous rehearsals at both task force and company levels, the company felt well prepared for this mission. On 012300Z March 2002, Lift 1, consisting of 1st and 2nd Platoons and the company headquarters, were in PSS posture.

At 020048Z March 2002, Lift 1 departed FOB Bagram enroute to LZ 13A and 13. Approximately an hour later, we landed, exited the aircraft, and started movement to establish blocking positions (BPs) Heather and Ginger. Almost immediately after the CH-47s departed, we came under enemy direct fire from a ridgeline to the east. The company command post (CP) and the battalion tactical command post (BN TAC) were accompanying 1st Platoon, the company main effort. 1st Platoon continued movement to establish Heather, and the command and control elements from both battalion and the company followed.

After a minute or two, the enemy's fire increased, and they engaged with rocket propelled grenades (RPGs). 1st Platoon took immediate action by suppressing the enemy, while the rest of Lift 1 took cover. We quickly moved out and established the CP in a draw approximately 75 meters away from the BN TAC.

While 1st Platoon continued to bound back and suppress, 2d Platoon established communications from LZ 13. They too were under heavy enemy direct and RPG fire. Also at 2nd Platoon's location was the battalion mortar platoon. I ordered 2nd Platoon to return fire, seek cover, and look for a route to establish blocking position Ginger. Meanwhile, 1st Platoon established Heather and began receiving direct fire from a ridgeline in the west. I reported to the BN TAC that Heather was established and that unless the enemy was destroyed in the east, it would be difficult to set up Ginger. The platoon forward observers from 1st and 2nd Platoon were calling for both indirect fires and CAS as their respective platoons moved into position.

We began to receive heavy enemy mortar fire at both locations. The enemy accurately adjusted the indirect fire and one round impacted directly on BP Heather, injuring the platoon leader, platoon sergeant, forward observer, and radio-telephone operator. The remainder of 1st Platoon was able to collect casualties and start movement to the company casualty collection point (CCP). While 1st Platoon moved to the CCP, another round impacted, resulting in more casualties.

Our strongpoint was established with darkness about five hours away. Although Heather and Ginger were not established, the strongpoint was in such a location that we were



The CH-47 Chinook proved to be the workhorse of the operation, airlifting soldiers and supplies where they were needed.

able to accomplish our mission of blocking enemy exfiltration routes Chrysler and Jeep.

We continued to receive enemy fire from the north, west, and east for the remainder of daylight. We engaged the enemy with everything we had—small arms, M203 HE, M240, 120mm mortars, CAS, and Apaches.

Although the enemy owned the high ground and surrounded us on three sides, the battle during daylight was at a stalemate. Once darkness fell, we dominated the fight. After 30 minutes of no enemy contact, the MEDEVAC helicopters were called in to evacuate our casualties. As the helicopters started to land, the enemy began to fire again. We immediately returned fire, and the aircraft safely departed.

For the next few hours, we used AC-130s and rendered the enemy ineffective. The AC-130s departed to rearm and refuel. Upon their return, we had approximately one hour to sweep the LZs, recover our equipment, and prepare for extraction.

The firefight lasted 18 hours and, although Company C sustained 19 casualties, the enemy was defeated. Numerous company level lessons were learned and confirmed from previous battles during this operation:

Ensure that everyone in your unit is trained to assume the next higher duty position. In our battalion, the battalion command sergeant major rigidly enforces the training of the “fall-out-one drill.” This is a drill where a leader or holder of a key position is wounded or killed, and the soldier next in line steps up and assumes those duties. This training could not have proved more valuable than on 2 March 2002. Shortly after setting up their platoon blocking position, 1st Platoon was hit with two 82mm mortar rounds, wounding the platoon leader and platoon sergeant. Without hesitation, the 3rd Squad leader assumed command of the platoon and flawlessly led it through the rest of the firefight. Nothing surprised this young staff sergeant, because he had trained for this scenario on numerous occasions.

Every soldier in the unit must be combat lifesaver qualified. During this 18-hour firefight, Company C sus-

tained 19 casualties. At this writing, every one of those casualties is back at work. Although the medical personnel attached to the company for this operation did an excellent job, it was the combat lifesaver who made the difference. Before Operation *Anaconda*, 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry, combat lifesaver certified every soldier in the battalion. There were no delays in delivering immediate treatment to every casualty sustained.

Having your higher headquarters co-located with you during an operation can be useful. The battalion TAC was co-located with Company C during this first firefight, and the leaders could not have asked for a better command relationship. There were no delays in any requests for guidance, and the experience alone that the members of the TAC brought to the fight was superb. The actions and demeanor of the battalion commander, command sergeant major, and operations officer set the example for the less experienced company leadership to follow.

Light infantry units must stay light. Our soldiers went into Operation *Anaconda* with two standard uniforms and one standard load. When we were moving or the weather was warm, we wore Gortex pants and the Army PT T-shirt under our Gortex jacket. This uniform worked well. The Army PT T-shirt is the only short-sleeved shirt in the Army's inventory that wicks the moisture away from the body. When we were static and it was cold, we wore polypropylene tops and bottoms with our Gortex. For both uniforms, we wore the issued "Matterhorn type" cold weather boots. The rucksack load was very simple—ammunition, batteries, water, chow, and warming gear (chiefly for casualties). Every ounce counts.

Full dress rehearsals are critical. The only aircraft Company C used for troop transport was the CH-47, loading on both the seats and the floor. This was something completely new for our troops. Not only had we never used CH-47s in training back at home station, we never used aircraft without everyone sitting in a seat. Although this did not pose a serious issue, with soldiers entering combat for the first time, it is important to employ any measures that can be

taken to reduce the number of new procedures for the soldiers. Knowing the soldiers' inexperience with CH-47s and floor loading, the chain of command scheduled a full-dress flyaway air assault rehearsal, which paid huge dividends and helped remove any uncertainty from the soldiers' minds.

When operating at high altitudes with extreme changes in temperatures, soldiers must have some sort of heating source or agent available to warm beverages. This is by no means a showstopper, but it does improve the soldiers' motivation, which in turn improves the soldiers' combat performance. Company C used heat tablets and stoves that the United Kingdom was more than happy to share with us. I am not sure whether the Army has such an item in its supply inventory, but if it does, I've never seen it. Whatever the case, if you find that you are about to lead your soldiers in a similar environment, order or purchase some sort of heat source for your soldiers.

Leaders must retain the decision authority of whether rucksacks are dropped during enemy contact. When an infantry unit makes enemy contact, the element in contact drops rucksacks, seeks cover, and returns fire, while the elements not in contact maneuver to an assault position, drop rucksacks, and destroy the enemy. What about when your entire unit is in contact with an enemy that has you surrounded from three directions on higher ground? As Company C came under enemy fire after exiting the aircraft, many rucksacks were dropped and the unit sought cover to return fire. This decision did not affect the battle until approximately the sixth hour, after casualties had been sustained, the temperature dropped, and resupply was needed. Never did we imagine that the battle would last for 18 hours. Company C was able to recover many of the rucksacks and needed supplies without any further casualties, but having a plan in place for the worst case scenario could have made the situation much easier to deal with. There is no cookie cutter solution to this issue, but the next time my unit is faced with a similar situation, there will be a load plan where one or two members of each squad or fire team will be packed for the worst and under no circumstances will drop their loads.

Sensitive items must always be kept on the soldier, not in an assault pack or rucksack. One lesson learned in Somalia was that no matter what time of day, when going into an operation, all soldiers must have their sensitive items, such as night vision devices. Company C followed this lesson learned, but now it needs to be taken to the next level. Where should night vision devices be stored? Do your soldiers sight out their night vision when they are going out to the local training for daylight battle drill training? They should. Many units carry their night vision devices around their necks at all times, but all too often, the equipment gets banged up or broken when the soldiers conduct individual movement techniques. The same goes when it is stored in a butt pack. Then there's



USAF air support was timely and accurate.

the assault pack. These work great for storing sensitive items when training at home station, but the truth of the matter is—unless you are on a QRF mission or part of a unit that is going to blaze into battle quickly and exit the same—the ruck sack is needed to carry the infantryman combat load. Maybe the new MOLLE (Modular Lightweight Load-Carrying Equipment) system will solve our problem. Although I have not used this system, I've been told that you can drop your main load and keep the assault pack on your back. When Company C landed in the Sahi-Kot Valley on 2 March 2002, the sun had just come up. Night vision equipment was not going to be needed for at least 12 hours after landing. Some of the company stored their night vision equipment in their rucksacks. Because the company was forced to drop rucksacks early or in the firefight, many soldiers were forced to move under enemy fire to retrieve their night vision devices. No matter what time of the day it is when a unit is operating in a combat area, all sensitive items must be kept on the soldier at all times.

Infantrymen must remain flexible and prepared to execute any type of mission that surfaces. Prior to Operation *Anaconda*, apart from securing valuable airfields, the missions Company C took part in were very far from the norm for which we had trained for back at Fort Drum. 1st Platoon was selected to be the QRF for Special Operations Forces conducting missions in Afghanistan. Training for this mission was facilitated through the battalion leaders' former experiences in SOF and Ranger assignments. 1st Platoon's first test of its QRF training came with a prison uprising in Qala-I Jangi, Afghanistan. The platoon performed magnificently. Within days of 1st Platoon's success, a second QRF mission came down: 3d Platoon flew into Mazar-e-sharif, Afghanistan, to secure a landing zone and evacuate casualties. Again, another superb execution. The final mission the company executed prior to Operation *Anaconda* was a detainee-screening mission at an Anti-Taliban Forces prison in Sherberghan, Afghanistan. The concept for this operation consisted of Company C securing the prison and routes to and from the detainee extraction point and a company of military police screening the detainees. Again, a mission



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that has never come close to making the company's mission essential task list was executed flawlessly. How do you train your unit to prepare for these unusual missions? Continue to focus on the basics. An infantry unit that is expert at physical training, marksmanship, combat lifesaving and battle drills can adapt and execute any mission as well as it can close with and destroy the enemy.

The U.S. Army noncommissioned officer and soldier are the best in the world. When a company is faced with a numerically superior enemy that holds dominating, key terrain, the success of the unit is in the hands of its NCOs and soldiers. The Company C NCO and soldier performance during this first firefight of Operation *Anaconda* was beyond anyone's expectations. All of the things that were continually stressed in training came together. From fire commands, conserving ammunition, repositioning key weapons, treating casualties, redistributing supplies, and maintaining the initiative, all were executed better than could have been imagined. Train your NCOs and soldiers and let them act—you'll be amazed.

Captain Nelson G. Kraft commanded Company C, 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry, for 18 months and currently commands headquarters and headquarters company, 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry). Previous assignments include rifle platoon leader and executive officer, 1st Battalion, 9th Infantry, and executive officer, 2d Battalion, 54th Infantry. He is a 1994 ROTC graduate of Bowling Green State University.
